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ABSTRACT

Many school systems are now in a state of transition due to a lack of supportive personnel because of budget cutbacks, a wider variation of classroom techniques, an increased individualization of instruction, and a changing neighborhood population of school children. Thus, new classroom guidance practices have become both possible and necessary. The training and utilization of teachers to perform guidance functions within the classroom setting has now become a necessity. Classroom teachers should act to maintain the learning environment, deal with long-range problems, and establish contacts with the family through parent-teacher conferences. (Author/KMF)

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THE TEACHER AS COUNSELOR IN SCHOOL
SYSTEMS IN TRANSITION

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The Teacher As Counselor in School Systems In Transition

The many modifications of structure and function currently being implemented in school districts across the country have created a situation which might be described as a stage of transition. Many factors are responsible for this movement, prominent among which are:

1. the curtailment of pupil personnel services due to budget cutbacks,
2. the modifications of classroom setting which provide for individualized and small group instruction as well as the traditional class size unit,
3. zoning changes which have resulted in population shifts and school-community reorganization.

In all of these circumstances, the teacher can and should assume a counseling function to augment the instructional role. In some instances the teacher becomes the counselor out of necessity; there simply is no other service available in the school. In other cases, the teacher has been liberated to the point of availability to couple instruction with increased individualized attention to students. Finally, there are cases where change has created new circumstances and problems for which no precedents exist, and here the teacher must consider and develop new approaches.

The following is a description of the nature of classroom situations encountered by teachers and some recommendations for action which teachers can adopt in serving students in a counseling capacity.

Maintaining The Learning Environment

Many teachers are functioning today in schools where the supportive services of counselors and other pupil personnel workers formerly provided a source of referral for children whose behavior in the classroom was disruptive to others or a deterrent to their own proper growth and development. At times these students created a crisis in the classroom and temporary removal was a practical course of action. If teachers no longer have the option of removing such children, the matter must be handled on the scene. The teacher must now be assisted to deal with that crisis situation so that the welfare of the group is maintained while appropriate measures are taken for the pupil.

An advisable course of action for the teacher is to take the distressed child aside and, as soon as possible thereafter, to engage the rest of the class in some independent, quiet activity so that attention can be devoted to the problem of the pupil in question. Most important in this initial contact is a spirit of openmindedness and concern. In such an atmosphere the incident can be talked over openly and honestly, and feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, fear, etc. can be confronted and explored.

The purpose of the session is not only to resolve the problem but to seek ways of dealing more constructively with possible similar problems in the future. At the end of the meeting both teacher and pupil should have a better idea of circumstances which are potentially explosive for the child and of alternative ways of behaving which are less anti-social. It is then possible for the teacher to follow up

by encouraging visible efforts by the student to carry out any agreed-upon recommendations and to remind the child when he/she does not do so.

Dealing with Long Range Problems

In the absence of diagnostic and therapeutic services, the classroom setting must assume as much of the burden for corrective assistance as possible. This is especially so in those cases where a pupil presents a persistent problem which interferes with the learning process; pupils who are performing below their level of ability, who are anti-social, or who present learning disabilities are examples of this sort of problem. Here the teacher must depend on those counseling techniques which can be adapted to the situation. Becoming a careful observer of the child is a major first step. As often as possible the teacher should observe the child in a variety of settings: doing an assignment, playing in a group, talking informally with a friend, talking personally with the teacher will yield a sampling of the child's behavior and response patterns which can form the basis for a discussion between the child and the teacher. The teacher can refer to these observations and listen while the child offers his/her reactions. Together, then, the teacher and the pupil can begin to formulate positive steps which will improve the situation.

This is the beginning of a process in which both teacher and pupil work at becoming more aware of the overall situation and endeavor to improve it. Setbacks as well as successes need to be acknowledged and, wherever possible, examined. As the child gains confidence and assurance, the teacher's involvement gradually decreases so that ultimately

the child arrives at a self-sustaining, self-motivating point.

Family Contacts

A third area in which the teacher may feel the need to assume a greater share of involvement is that of family, particularly parent, conferences. Most school systems routinely schedule, at periodic intervals, opportunities for parents to meet the teachers and discuss pupil progress. Such meetings are usually brief and often can only constitute a report by the teacher which is received by the parent. As such, these meetings are of limited value to parent or teacher, especially in cases where the problems of the pupil call for improved cooperation and understanding between home and school. To provide this type of effort, schools have often depended upon the services of a counselor, and in the absence of a counselor, the teacher may wish to assume some of the responsibility.

The scheduling of an extended parent conference may present major problems. However, a gym period, assembly, film, or other activity which occupies the entire class in another part of the school building can be used.

The parent conference should be planned in advance so that the teacher will be prepared to present all matters to be covered during the meeting. The teacher's responsibility in this conference is to convey facts in the form of observations, anecdotal information, and any other data which expresses the nature of the pupil's problem. Rather than create an atmosphere of confrontation between teacher and parent, however, it should be clear that the purpose of the meeting is to find

ways by which the concern and cooperation of both can be used for the benefit of the child. What should follow, then, is a straightforward dialog in which a sincere effort is made to establish the reasons for the problem and steps to overcome it. Positive and negative factors need to be examined. In some cases one conference is insufficient and further contacts are needed. Where time allows for this, it is most advisable; however, if necessary, telephone calls or notes to the home can be helpful. In any event, some plan of followup contact is necessary so that the result of any effort extended is made known to those concerned and the process continues to be developed and enriched. If, incidentally, the child comes to realize that his parents and teacher are cooperatively engaged in an attempt to assist him, this awareness may benefit everyone concerned in ways that extend far beyond the school.

When and Where?

The concept of the modern teacher undertaking the demands of a counseling function might raise questions as to how such activities can be incorporated into the busy classroom schedule. One suggestion might be to modify the existing classroom structure to allow for greater diversity in the organization of the school day. Many classroom teachers have found that some version of open classroom structure which makes available time for independent, individualized activities, not only permits children to develop and pursue educational interests of their own, but also frees the teacher to circulate about the room assisting individuals and small groups with suggestions, tutoring, and counseling.

Other teachers have available to them the services of classroom paraprofessionals who can supervise the group while the teacher attends to the immediate needs of a particular child, or who can ease a potential crisis situation by taking a child aside and providing supervision until the teacher is available.

Paraprofessionals, who are often residents of the local community, can be an excellent source of assistance in matters involving family contacts; in some instances they may know the family in question personally. Their awareness of prevailing community attitudes toward the school, the teachers, the curriculum, etc., are also useful in establishing communication. Finally, their presence may bolster a parent who is hesitant or reluctant to meet the teacher face to face and discuss a problem.

Paraprofessionals, too, can assist in followup efforts with individual pupils, working not only with learning problems but by encouraging and reinforcing the pupil when improvement is noted.

The Changing Scene

Thus far the focus of this paper has been on ways in which the teacher as counselor can incorporate into the existing situation approaches to a better climate for learning which are designed to meet problems which typically occur in every classroom. By applying techniques based upon careful observation, open communication, and followup, the teacher can establish an atmosphere within the classroom which, in the absence of more specialized guidance resources, can

contribute to the alleviation of some of the tensions which may arise.

Today's schools, however, reflect many social changes: racial integration, high unemployment, expanding programs for the handicapped, rising rates of divorce and crime, and mothers entering or resuming a career are all mirrored in the lives of the children who come to school. Not only do these children express in school the attitudes and experiences which they have acquired in their homes and communities, but they are sometimes called upon to rise to situations which have no precedent in their experience. The observant teacher may detect the subtle effects of these situations in some cases; in others, the effects are by no means subtle but, rather, have openly disruptive consequences.

The classroom teacher is one of very few individuals available who knows the pupils in her class as a group well enough to predict their reaction to a given set of circumstances. With this advantage, it is possible once again for the teacher to assume a counseling function, here utilizing group as well as individual techniques.

Where the teacher observes that numbers of pupils in the class are preoccupied with a matter of significance to the social or personal welfare of the class, she can initiate a discussion concerning that matter in which the feelings and attitudes of the group can be explored. Often it is helpful for the group to be seated in a circle so that faces can be seen and voices heard and everyone has clear access to the discussion. A major skill here is that of permitting the children to state their concerns without the eruption of open hostility, intimidation, or humiliation. The teacher should guide

the group toward the constructive purposes of the discussion and away from damaging side effects, although a spirit of honesty and respect for differences of opinion must be maintained. The goal of this process is to make children more aware of both differences within the group which should be respected and of the supportive effects of shared feelings.

The foregoing discussion is an attempt to suggest ways in which teachers can diversify their professional role to meet some of the demands which have been brought about by today's schools in transition. A word of caution, however, should not be overlooked. Teachers should not, in assuming the role of counselor, undertake to "treat" children. Children whose problems require professional attention should receive professional attention. The teacher, through sympathetic and sensitive handling, can assist the child and can alert the parents, but the classroom is not primarily a therapeutic community and the teacher is not a therapist. In knowing as much as possible about a child and by basing a relationship on that knowledge, the teacher can make a substantial contribution to the total adjustment of the child, but that contribution should not extend to levels of psychodynamics in which the teacher is not qualified to perform.

Concerning the specific techniques and philosophy of counseling which the teacher uses, the following considerations should be noted:

1. The teacher is supportive. This means that she attempts to share feelings, displays empathy, offers encouragement and friendship, and tries to find ways to be of assistance.

2. The teacher attempts to be objective in speaking honestly and tactfully with the child and in recognizing and acknowledging fully any personal emotional involvement which she may feel.

3. The teacher is openminded and does not suggest solutions to problems or advice for parents or children to follow. Instead, she participates, from her vantage point, in a process of cooperative effort to find improvements to an existing state of affairs in ways that are acceptable to all concerned.

4. The teacher does not attempt to diagnose symptoms or to experiment in any way. She is simply using the time, training and concern which she has for her students to seek out ways of improving the learning process for her students, particularly in those situations where referral sources are no longer available.

A final comment: the suggestions which have been outlined in this paper represent only the briefest outline of procedures which may be followed. Quite obviously, without sufficient training, the teacher is limited in what she can accomplish. Nevertheless, the teacher is in a position to make many sensitive judgments and observations. What might be desirable would be to incorporate into teacher training and in-service programs more intensive coverage of the material presented here. If schools are to change with changing times, teachers need assistance in effecting those changes. In this way change need not be for the worse, even in times of stress, but can be for the better.

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